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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MONTENEGRIN INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM: TENSIONS

UNWIND

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Ref: Belgrade 655

1. (SBU) Summary: Political tensions relaxed after both blocs realized that they had "gone too far" in the past week. In the wake of the heavily publicized opposition trip to Washington, strong public and private statements by Ambassador Polt and the Consulate cautioned politicians against efforts to draw the USG inappropriately into the referendum issue. The Republic Referendum Commission resumed work, after the release from detention of a pro-Union bloc commission member, suspected of fraudulent voter registrations. A public poll showed independence getting just over the required 55 percent of votes. Open voter registration ended April 26 with a record 479,523 electors enrolled. The Radical leadership said his party would join the pro-Union campaign only if invited. End summary.

Political Tensions Relax - But Aren't Gone

2. (SBU) Podgorica PO met April 26 with EU Envoy Miroslav Lajcak, who was in Podgorica for one day in an attempt to lower the temperature of the campaign. He said he had asked both Djukanovic and Bulatovic and their respective teams to "calm down." He believes his advice will be heeded, and that they both understand they have gone too far, particularly in connection with the scandal involving election commission member Nikola Medojevic (para 7). When Medojevic was released, some Montenegrin press gave Lajcak the credit, although he modestly denied to PO any direct responsibility for it. He did concede, however, that his occasional visits provided a convenient and effective way for the sides to retreat from the brink without losing face.

3. (SBU) Lajcak reported that Djukanovic says Serbian PM Kostunica is "fully focused" on Montenegro, since he thinks he can still affect the outcome of the referendum -- unlike in Kosovo, about which, so Djukanovic, Kostunica has mostly given up hope. This obsession with Montenegro, Djukanovic believes, may lead Kostunica to try increasingly desperate tricks as the campaign progresses. Lajcak noted that he fully agreed with Djukanovic's assessment. Lajcak added that what Kostunica and the pro-Union side don't understand is that even if they succeed in defeating Djukanovic, "they can't get rid of the young, progressive, intelligent half of the population that supports him." Comment: The pro-Unionists, who have counted so fervently on having EU High Representative Solana secretly pulling for them, would be crushed to hear Solana's Special Envoy express such sentiments. End comment.

14. (SBU) Party leaders appear to have sent the message out to cool tempers. Poloff's meeting April 26 with the pro-Union mayor and council of Herceg Novi (on the Croatian border) began with an emphasis on consensus and cooperation across party lines. Angers soon flared when the Social Democratic (SDP) councilor (pro-Independence) accused the city government of mispending funds to support pro-Union sentiment, an accusation hotly refuted by the People's Party (NS) caucus head. The mayor and council speaker (both SNP) moved promptly to quiet matters.

Ambassador, Consulate Warn Politicians

15. (U) In a concerted effort, Ambassador Polt and the Consulate publicly and privately warned Montenegrin politicians who, over the past week, claimed to have USG support for, inter alia, efforts to displace PM Djukanovic. Most of the Montenegrin media prominently carried Ambassador Polt's April 26 interview with Belgrade news agency Beta highlighting his statement that the recent visit of the Montenegrin opposition delegation to the United States was neither official, nor organized as an invitation by the U.S. Unfortunately, Anti-government daily "Dan" was the only daily newspaper which did not mention the interview. Dan was the daily that first "broke" the story about the "official" invitation to the Department.

16. (SBU) On April 27, Consulate met separately with Dragan Soc of the People's Party (NS), and Nebojsa Medojevic, head of the proto-party Group for Changes (GZP). Both had prominently claimed that the April 20-21 visit of the "Alternative Four" to Washington marked a change in USG policy, to support of forces opposed to PM Djukanovic. Soc

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quickly, even peremptorily, conceded that his statements were in error, and contrary to the USG's well-known position of neutrality on the outcome of the referendum and its oft-stated position that only the USG will make public characterizations of its position. Medojevic agreed that no official invitation had been extended, but clearly failed to grasp our request that he not characterize the USG position.

Republic Referendum Commission Resumes Work

17. (U) The Republic Referendum Commission resumed work April 26, after it had adjourned without activity on April 25 when the eight pro-Union commission members failed to appear. The pro-Union bloc absence was in protest of the arrest of one of its members for allegedly forging powers of attorney in connection with voter registrations (Ref). The member was quickly released from detention. After Commission Chair Ambassador Lipka (Slovakia) and EU Envoy Lajcak (Slovakia) expressed concerns about the arrest and the need for commission members to avoid conflicts of interest, the pro-Union members attended the next Commission session.

18. (SBU) Comment: For now, the threat of a boycott has receded. Consulate's reading of the referendum law, supported by the local lawyer's association and OSCE/ODIHR is that legally the commission can function even if the pro-Union bloc boycotts. Such an outcome is not desirable as tending toward political instability and lowered support for the results of the referendum vote. End comment.

Poll Shows Independence - Barely

19. (U) According to a poll conducted April 14 to 21 throughout Montenegro, independence is supported by 55.9 percent while 44.1 percent are against. The law requires

independence to be supported by 55 percent of valid votes cast to be passed. The poll's margin of error is 3.5 percent.

Voter Registration Ends

¶10. (U) Voter registration ended April 26, with a record 479,523 electors enrolled. Podgorica has 126,932 voters. Further adjustments and enrollments can only be made by the Administrative Court, through May 12.

Radicals on Sidelines

¶11. (SBU) Deputy President of Serb Radical Party (SRS) Tomislav Nikolic announced publicly April 26 that, unless invited by the pro-Union bloc, he would not get directly involved in the campaign, although he would support the Union by his statements in Belgrade. Comment: In early March, the Consulate had cautioned the pro-Union bloc leadership in the Socialist People's Party (SNP) that if they include the Radicals in their coalition, the USG would view that step with concern. SNP has subsequently confirmed to us that they are acting in accordance with that message. End comment.

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